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Jacopo del Sellaio (1442 - 1493)

Cupid and Psyche, c.1473

Tempera and gold on a wooden panel

The Artist and Painting Style

Jacopo del Sellaio was born and worked in Florence during the Renaissance, at a time when the city was emerging as the cultural and artistic centre of Europe. He was trained by the painter Fra Filippo Lippi and his style of painting uses a light palette of colours and experiments with linear perspective. He was influenced by the artist Sandro Botticelli who trained with him and their work is sometimes confused.

Context

This colourful panel is from a 'spalliera,' a decorated backboard. It would either be mounted on a wall as a headboard or attached to furniture, most commonly a 'cassoni' (marriage chest). These special chests were made to celebrate a marriage, and were part of a bride's dowry. They were filled with expensive linen and cloths and paraded through the streets from the bride's family home to her new home as part of the wedding celebration. It would then sit in the bedroom where it would be used for storage and sometimes as a bench.

Composition

This panel shows the first half of an ancient romance in which the mortal princess Psyche is married to the god of love, Cupid. The story is read from left to right like a cartoon strip. Two bedchambers 'bookend' the action at either end - on the left Psyche is conceived and born, and the room on the right hand side shows her marital bed with Cupid.

Sellaio arranges everything symmetrically to balance out the different elements of the picture. For instance, the hovering figure of Cupid is echoed by the figure of Psyche being blown from her mountain, and the three suitors match the sisters on the other side of the composition.

Continuous Narrative

Fifteen episodes from the story appear across the panel. Many of these involve the same characters and all take place against a simple background and landscape. Psyche appears eleven times - ten as a woman and once as a new-born child. This method of visual storytelling is called 'continuous narrative' and, like the tale of Cupid and Psyche, it is based on classical models from Roman sarcophagi. This might be confusing today when we are used to seeing single frames of action. However, this was familiar way of telling stories in Renaissance Italy.



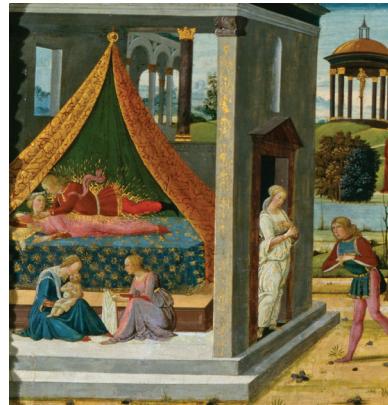
The Story of Cupid and Psyche

Psyche was born to her mortal mother Endelechia but her father was Apollo the god of the sun. As a baby she was cared for by sisters. Psyche grew into a beautiful young woman and attracted attention from young men from all over the land. People began to say that Psyche was even more beautiful than Venus, the goddess of love and beauty, which made the goddess very angry. As a punishment, Venus sent her son Cupid to shoot an arrow at Psyche, so she would fall in the love with the ugliest man on Earth. However, Cupid, distracted by Psyche's extraordinary beauty, accidentally cut his own finger on an arrow while trying to shoot her and fell deeply in love with her.

Her parents do not know who to choose for Psyche to marry, so are told by an oracle to take Psyche to the top of a mountain for the answer. When she stands on top, she is magically blown by the Zephyr, the West wind to Cupid's Palace. She is met by invisible servants who welcomed her and gave her wonderful gifts and delicious food. Although she is very happy in her lovely new palace, Cupid only ever comes to see Psyche at night so she never sees his face and never realises he is a god. Even though Psyche loves her new life and husband, after a while she gets lonely and begs for her sisters to come and visit.

Cupid agrees, but when her sisters arrive they are jealous of all her new found riches and love. They whisper in Psyche's ear that if her husband does not want to be seen he must be a monster. They persuade Psyche to look at him while he is sleeping to check. The sisters depart with gifts, and that night Psyche secretly lights a lamp when Cupid is sleeping. She is dazzled by his beauty when she sees his for the first time, but a drop of oil falls from the lamp and wakes him. Cupid, furious that she has broken her promise, flies away in a fit of rage. Psyche is devastated, discovering too late her true love for her husband.

The story continues on another panel which is now in a private collection. Cupid returns to his mother, Venus. Psyche searches the world for beloved Cupid but is captured and enslaved by Venus. Cupid pleads with Jupiter to free Psyche and then they are finally reunited and married. It is a famous story of love overcoming adversity.



Discussion Points

Journeys

There are lots of different types of journeys in this painting. What different journeys do people take, and on which forms of transport? What would you bring with you on each journey? Do people make the same kind of journeys today as they did in the past? What are some of the reasons people travel? What might it feel like to leave your own house and move to live with a new family you might have never met before?

Special containers

The cassone was a gift from the bride's family to the newly married couple. What gifts do you and your family give each other on special occasions? Do you have any special objects or furniture in your house? Are there special stories that you tell each other at these times? What other stories might you tell at a wedding?

Weather

This landscape painting includes lots of elements of weather; Apollo the god of the sun, and the magical west wind blowing Psyche to Cupid's castle. What kind of weather can you see outside today? How is it different to the weather we see in this picture? What different types of weather do we get? What season do you think it is? What colours, or plants has the painter included in the background and foreground to help us guess?

Landscape, perspective and composition

There are some interesting plants and architecture in the background of the painting. Renaissance artists began to try and make their paintings more realistic and began to experiment with illusion in art with the invention of linear perspective. What tricks do you use in your own drawings to make things look further away? Del Sellaio also uses symmetry to balance out the composition. Can you make your own symmetrical design?

Links

Other items from Fitzwilliam Museum collections that offer contrasting depictions of some of the themes in Jacopo del Sellaio's Cupid and Psyche [M.75]*:

Journeys

- Ford Madox Brown 'The Last of England' 1860 [M. Add .3]
- Nicholas Hilliard 'Dangers Averted' gold medal [MI.I30]
- John James Audubon's 'Birds of America' Plate 43

Special Containers

- Roman sarcophagi [GR.I.I835]
- Painted wooden panel from an Anicent Egyptian Coffin [E.69.I903]
- 16th Century Maiolica dish showing storytelling in Renaissance Italy [EC.30-I938]
- Ceramic Owl Jar [C.4I & A-I928]
- Amphora [GR.3.I943]

Weather

- Claude Monet 'Le Printemps' 1886 [PD.2-I953]
- Camille Pissarro 'Snowy Landscapae at Eragny with an Apple Tree.' 1895 [PD.974-I963]
- Willem II Van de Velde ' Storm at Sea' 18th century [No.53]

Landscape, perspective and composoition

- Jan Davidz De Heem, 'Flowers in a Glass Vase' 1660 [No.I487]
- Samuel Palmer 'The Magic Apple Tree' 1830 [No.I490]
- Domenico Veneziano, The Annunciation I442-I448 [II06]

*Accession numbers found in this pack can be used to access further information and images on our website collection explorer.